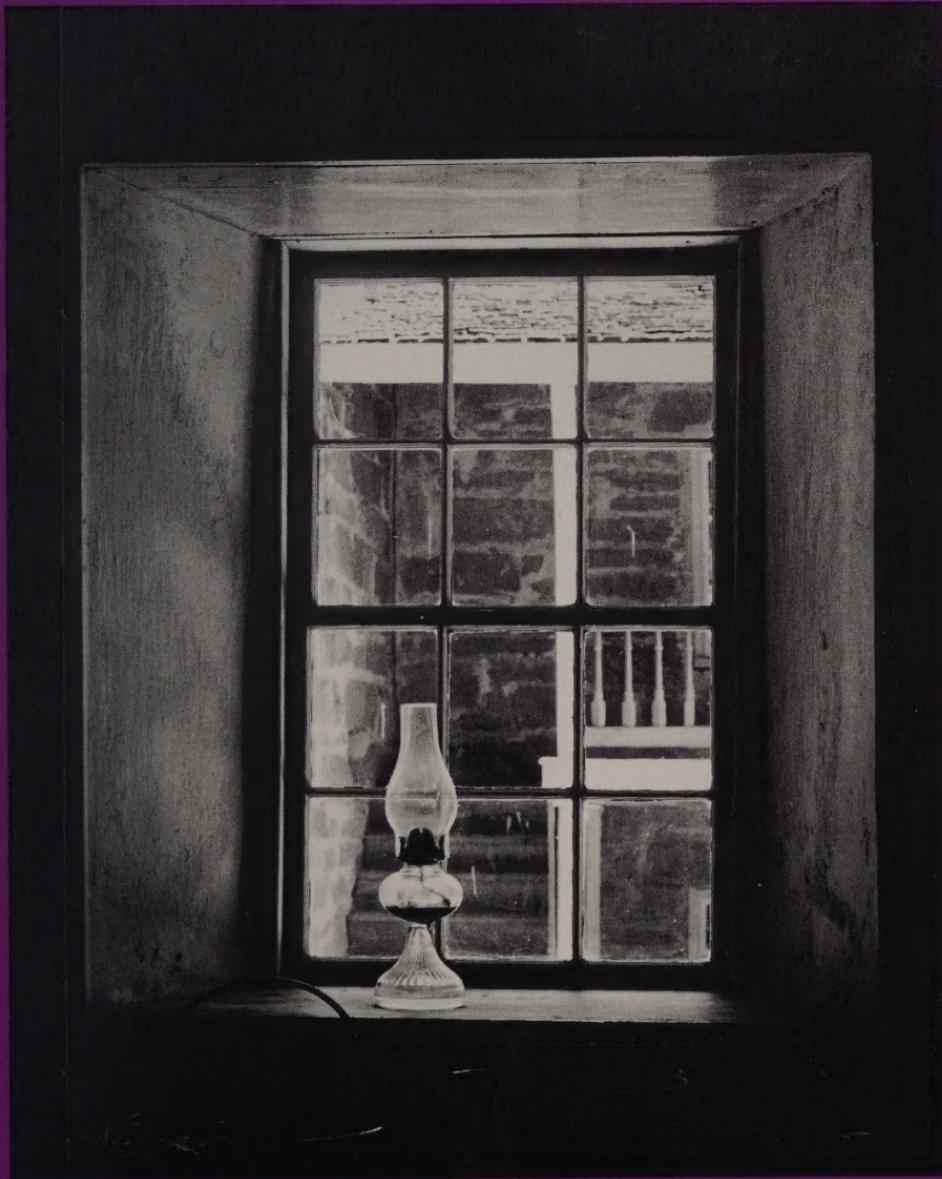


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SACRED JOURNEY



THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER ~ FEBRUARY 1998

SACRED JOURNEYTM

THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

The mission of Fellowship in Prayer is

to encourage and support

a spiritual orientation to life,

to promote the practice of

prayer,

meditation,

and service to others,

and to help bring about

a deeper spirit

of unity among humankind.

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Cover photo by: Robert F. Campbell

FROM THE PRESIDENT

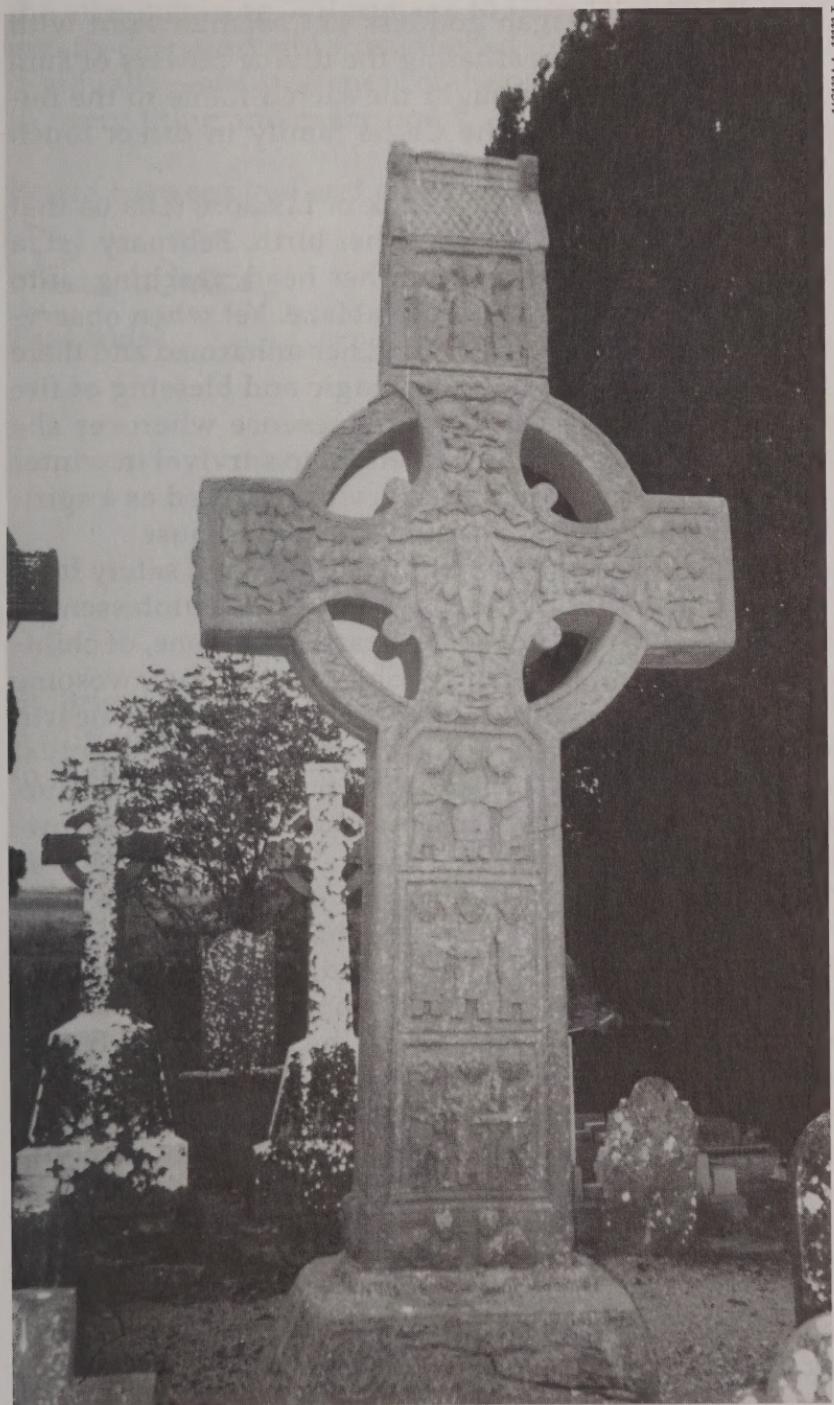


Happy first days of Spring! No, I'm not confused. In the ancient Celtic calendar of the seasons, February 1st was celebrated as the first day of spring and the feast day of St. Brigid, the goddess of fire and the hearth in pagan Ireland and, along with St. Patrick, the most beloved saint of the Irish Celts.

I learned about the fascinating life and times of Brigid on a recent trip to Ireland in the company of some thirty other fellow seekers on a "Pilgrimage to Glendalough," sponsored by the Shalem Institute. Mysterious and magical, Glendalough, some twenty-five miles south of Dublin, is one of the most beautiful and holy places in Ireland, famous as a pilgrimage center from the sixth century on, and the site of St. Kevin's monastic city, whose ruins pulse with the divine presence that is immanent in every breeze and bush, every stone and sheep, every sacred building of that ancient spiritual community.

In the next issue of *SACRED JOURNEY* we'll tell you much more about the "Pilgrimage to Glendalough" and the insights, revelations, and transforming experiences that opened up to us on that numinous journey. But now, let me tell you the story of Brigid, described by the seventh-century St. Boccan as "Brigid, excellent woman, a flame, golden, delightful."

According to legend, Brigid was born in a druid's house in A.D. 453. What is certain is that she made the



transition from pagan goddess to Christian saint with no trouble at all. Incarnating the divine powers of sun, light, and fire, she brought the sacred flame to the human hearth, putting the Celtic family in direct touch with the ultimate mysteries.

The fifteenth-century Book of Lismore tells us that as the sun rose on the day of her birth, February 1st, a tower of fire soared up from her head, reaching into heaven and setting the house ablaze. Yet when observers ran to her rescue, they found her unharmed and there was no fire to be found. The magic and blessing of fire continued to characterize her presence wherever she went, and the hearth fire, essential to survival in winter and to cooking all year 'round, was regarded as a spiritual gift from Brigid, blessing the entire house.

As the bringer of fire, light, warmth, and safety from the darkness, Brigid was prayed to as the quintessential protector of the family, of the hearth and home, of child-bearing, and of abundance. She brought the awesome and tremendous powers of heaven to the family hearth every day of the year, and on February 1st the festival of her birth was celebrated as the beginning of the journey from the cold and darkness of winter into the growing light and warmth of spring. No wonder she was welcomed into every home in Celtic Ireland, a land where the dividing line between this world and the next, between the sacred and the secular, is very thin indeed. You feel her presence everywhere, not only in the churches and holy wells, but in the sacred vessels that are the hospitable and welcoming people of Ireland.

If you're looking for something to celebrate, then, amidst the blues and blahs of February, light a candle in honor of St. Brigid, that excellent woman...sun-dazzling, splendid guide to spring, rebirth, and the eternal Kingdom.

In the April issue of *SACRED JOURNEY* when we're all convinced that spring has really, finally, come 'round again, we'll tell you more about the Celtic vision and

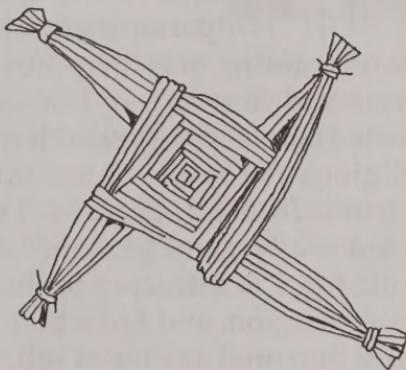
the awe-inspiring "Pilgrimage to Glendalough" that so greatly deepened and strengthened—collectively and individually—our awareness of the presence of the divine in every thing and every body.

Brigid between you and all harm,

Paul Walsh

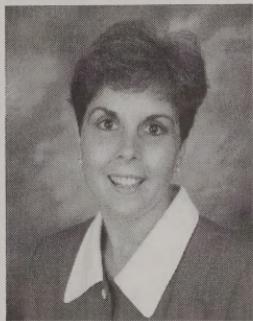
Paul Walsh

St. Brigid's Cross,
traditionally hung
in Irish kitchens.



For much of the legend and history of St. Brigid I am indebted to Michael Dames' Mythic Ireland, published by Thames and Hudson, New York, NY.

FROM THE EDITOR



A parent posed a question during an informal gathering: "Wouldn't a good person be just as good without faith?" Our free-flowing discussion had turned to why some of our families participate in regular religious education and worship services and others don't. Ultimately most of the parents around the table hoped that religious training will help our kids learn about "forgiveness and how to say I'm sorry" and "to know the difference between right and wrong." One said, "Aren't all religions the same? I am teaching my children the basic truths from all religions. I want each one to choose and be a really good person." Another admitted, "I'm Catholic but I'm attracted to Buddhism—it seems to be the quiet religion, and I like that." And as we talked several told personal stories of religious parents or institutions that used faith as a battering ram to enforce good behavior or to impose an unquestionable belief system.

I came home pondering why my faith in God and spiritual practices are a top priority to me. Do I pray, read, worship, wonder, and offer service to others so that I may be a good person? Taking my children to church is important to me. But why? What is the goal of faith or spiritual practice?

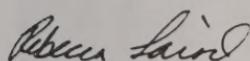
For me the goal of faith is inner knowledge of and honest encounter with God. I order my life around my Christian faith as it gives me meaning, direction, and joy. Goodness or morality isn't the chief end. In the New

Testament, goodness is listed among "the fruit of the Spirit," that is, it is a virtue that comes to full bloom when nourished by an abiding connection with God. Said another way, goodness is a flower along life's path, but it is not the reason to follow the path—God is.

In this month's Questions & Answers Zehra-Latif tells us of the Sufi path as she discusses her work as a Sufi guide and healer. Carolyn Humphreys describes "The Spiritual Quest" for one who follows in the footsteps of Teresa of Avila. Tony Burkart retraces *A Transforming Experience* that led him out of the ordained ministry, while Barbara St. John recounts how she found courage to put her life on the line for a stranger in a *Spirituality and Service* feature. Linda Mack shows how service is a type of prayer in *Ways of Prayer*. Through poetry Mary Krane Dorr depicts the "spiraling fullness of God" and Jody Adams reminds us that "None value light who know not dark/None know belief who dread not doubt." And lastly, in *Books We've Enjoyed*, we review two volumes that offer food for thought and fuel for action.

During these winter months may these wise guides serve as companions on the spiritual path. You are not alone.

Blessings,



Rebecca Laird



THE ULTIMATE FRIEND

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS



Zehra-Latif

Two centuries after the death of Muhammad, mystically inclined Muslims concerned by the worldliness and external religious forms they perceived in Muslim practice, gathered around spiritual guides to seek direct experience of the Divine. In The World's Religions Houston Smith describes the Sufi impulse this way: Someone who was ignorant of fire could come to know it by degrees: first by hearing of it, then by seeing it, and finally by being burned by its heat. "Sufis want to be burned by God."

Today many orders of Sufis exist and some, including the Sufi Order of the West, do not require practitioners to be followers of Islam. Sufism, perhaps, is better understood as a path toward inner wisdom and experience of God than as a set of beliefs or external forms of faith. The goal, as an early Sufi declared, is to "love the pitcher less and the water more."

Zehra-Latif is a Sufi guide and healer through the Sufi Center of Princeton. She works with individuals and increasingly, she facilitates groups as they collectively seek to connect with God. She also gives workshops on healing at the Abode of the Message, a retreat center inspired by the works of Sufi master, Hazrat Inayat Khan.

Rebecca Laird: Give me the simple version of what you do in your healing practice.

Zehra-Latif: A person comes to see me presenting a

backache, a disease, or something that doesn't feel right in his or her body. I'm a sort of detective who helps the person discover where the problem is. Is the unease completely in the body? Or is this an unease primarily in the mind and heart? Sometimes the disease stems from not having, or losing, a connection with the Divine. I seek to help people listen to their bodies and reconnect with the Divine. I help them to find a place wherein the body is free of disease or unease and the mind and heart are at peace and happy with the place they are in and with the world around them.

I start by getting to know who the person is through talking visits. Are you better than last week? Is there something going on in your life that is affecting your body? Is there something going on in your body that is affecting your life? When I am working, I mentally say, "Okay God, you are on." Whatever happens then I consider myself to be a bystander. I keep working, but I am being directed. Nothing is inhabiting my body, but what is happening is that I am being guided to ask a question, to notice something I may have missed, to touch in a certain way, to tell a story. I often tell a story, and it brings up some grief or awareness. I pay attention to these little nudgings for these are the things that give me the information or elicit the information that helps people get better.

When people come to me I try to see each person as whole. I can also see that their bodies are torn and wracked. I see all of that but what I am holding is my image of them as whole in mind, body, and soul.

I try to love each person who walks through the door. I may not like them, but I can love them. When I say love, I don't mean a maudlin, wishy washy feeling. Love means for me to keep my heart open and to be totally present and available for what others need and what I can give. There are moments in all of our lives when something happens that forever changes your view of who you are. I try to be aware of those moments.

In helping others, I don't require them to follow my spiritual path of Sufism. My feeling is that each person has their own version of who God is for them. They should be on a path that is right for them. Maybe it is basic Christianity, basic Buddhism, basic Islam, or no particular path but the one they develop themselves. Each person needs a connection with the divinity within themselves and who they think of as God. Without that we tend to make our lives very uncomfortable, and I've done that in my life, too. I've been in that place of hurt where I've had to work through it and come back to a place of peace. For me, everything I do, every breath, is a part of the healing process. It's all one thing, one path, one direction.

What brought you to this work?

I think I was born to be brought into this work. My great-grandmother, my grandmother, and my mother were all healers in some form. My grandmother was a midwife and worked with herbs. Before her, my great-grandmother was called a "root-woman." In the African-American community that means that you have such a way of working with herbs and the things of the earth that you can effect changes in the bodies, minds, and hearts of the people who come to you.

When I was thirty and began working professionally, I looked back on all that and realized how I had been called into this work as a child. At that time I was working with a chiropractor in Texas. All of her patients came through my office first. I would work with them doing reflexology and solar nutrition. The more I worked, the more curious I became about what was going on with the body. I have had a lot of excursions into holistic healing.

I grew up in Eatonville, Florida, the oldest, on-going African-American community in the United States, and we were Baptists. Growing up in the Baptist church,

I was always questioning; but my teachers couldn't answer my questions. I read the same book they did, but what I got out of the Bible wasn't the same thing they got out of it. When I was about twelve years old my mother and I had a discussion, and she said as long as I kept reading the Bible I could still be a Christian. I did that.

After my first year in college we moved to Illinois. When people asked me what I did for fun and I answered: "Well, I read books, and I go to museums," they said, "No, what do you do for fun?" So I tried to drink. I would go into clubs and parties where people were drinking and having such a good time and I'd be the only one crying. I'm empathic and feel a lot of what people feel around me. I was untrained then, so I didn't know what I was feeling or why I was crying. My heart was hurting. I didn't realize in my early twenties that people were doing these things because they didn't have a good connection with the Divine. You can do those things, but if you do them while connected to the Divine you become more joyous, and you don't let those things take you over. People seemed to get lost in those things, trying as hard as they could to be happy.

During this two-year period I became increasingly depressed. One day, I remember standing in the middle of my apartment and crying, wondering "Why am I so unhappy? I've never been like this." Suddenly, I felt as if something were there. I couldn't figure out what it was. The next day, I went to a bookstore and picked up a book about Edgar Cayce called *There is a River*. I read about how a connection with your soul and the Divine brings more balance in your life. A great peace came over me. I knew what that presence was, for it had always been with me. When I was five or six I had gone to Sunday School and they had explained that God was everywhere and saw everything you did. So I went home, went up to my room, closed the door, and said, "Okay God, come out." And nothing happened. So I

waited and waited. Then I said, "Okay, I'm going to do what I want to do, and if you don't like it, you can tell me." From that time on, there was what I call this comforting presence. During that two-year period in my early twenties, I forgot about the Divine. But once I re-connected, I didn't feel lonely and I didn't feel alone.

How do we prepare our bodies and minds to connect with the Divine?

Along the way I began learning Yoga. My yogi taught me that there is One God and that it is your path and work to connect with that God. You don't need to connect with God through anyone else. What he taught is the same kind of path that I learned in Sufism. As a yogi, I learned to meditate and to take care of my body, for our bodies are the temples of God. Welcoming the Divine into dirty temples doesn't work. There are subtle channels, passageways in the body that need to be clean so that you can receive the information that is coming into you. Otherwise you wind up like Saul/Paul on the road to Damascus. When God said, "Here I am," he was unconscious for a lot of days. He couldn't see, he couldn't hear; he was out. If you keep your body, your mind, and your heart clean, when the connection with the Divine comes, and it can, you won't go unconscious.

We stay open through meditation and keeping our bodies clean. Many of the holy books of the world speak to dietary lessons. Those ancient holy books meant what they said. When they say don't eat pork or shellfish, these aren't things we can discount. Pigs have similar enough diseases to humans that harmful parasites find a favorable host when eaten by humans, and shellfish collect the poisons under the ocean. So saying that these prohibitions were for an ancient period is not true. There are some things in holy books that were meant for some people in one specific time, but there are overall laws that remain true from people to people, country to country..

My yoga teacher taught me how to keep the body clean, healthy, and strong. He helped me to look at the traumas that had hurt me so badly and closed me down. He helped me to pull them out, look at them and ease the heart pain. If your heart isn't hurting so badly that you say "no" to things then you can look at a deeper and more powerful aspect of yourself. The same thing applies to the mind. Once you clear the heart your meditation becomes deeper. Your meditation allows you to receive more powerfully, deeply, and purely, the information you are getting.

Tell me about what it means to you to be a Sufi.

After I moved on from my yoga teacher, I was initiated as a Sufi. In my tradition, the Sufi Order of the West, the bottom line is the love of the Beloved—God. You see the Beloved—God—in every being you see. In your beloved—your human lover—you learn to see the Beloved so that you can see the fullness of God. When you are totally in love with a human person it widens your horizons so that you begin to see the colors of the earth as more wonderful. Each person that you see is filled with love and light. All is wonderful around you. Nothing has changed really, you just fell in love. But you learn to see through looking at your beloved, the face of the Beloved with a capital 'B.' Human relations are a window to our relationship with the Beloved.

The Sufi Order of the West is like a prescription for Western culture which has lost its capacity for closeness, for loving, and for trusting. We accept all of those religions that have a belief in the One God and even the prophets and the teachers who have come to reveal the message of the One God. Weekly we have a Universal Worship Service and on our altar we have a large candle which is symbolic of God. From the large candle we light seven other candles that honor other traditions:: Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Chris-

tianity, Islam and we have one candle for all those known or unknown who have held aloft the light of truth in the darkness of human ignorance. That is the candle of Truth. It holds our awareness that there is more than us. Our order doesn't demand that you be Islamic; you simply have to be there and learn to love. Other Sufi orders are more restrictive in belief and practice. In our religion you are who you are and you are learning to be closer to the Divine. That is the bottom line.

Beyond worship what other spiritual practices order and strengthen your spiritual life?

I have spent a tremendous number of years doing deep meditation. I may do some prayers, chants, or practices that have to do with light or sound to center myself, but these aren't meditation to me. Meditation is sitting in silence waiting. For years my mind would flutter around but I learned to make a time in my preparation for my mind to do it's trekking. I would let my mind go traveling back through the day and fuss. Then I would say, "that's enough of that." Then I'd sit and wait. I consider prayer talking to God and meditation God talking to me. So I sit and wait. God talks not in words and often not through feeling. Hearing God through meditation comes when I enter that space of knowing that I truly am everything and everything is truly me. I don't have to do anything. I am and God is. I don't really know how to talk about it. I don't do the same meditation that I did years ago. Now I am in meditation every moment that I am working. When I am deeply involved in the work that I do, I am in total ecstasy. In those moments, there is no place to go, nothing to want, nothing to need.

Do you have any other thoughts on prayer you'd like to share?

In Sufism, God is the ultimate Friend and those of us who love God are also called friends. There is this strong belief that God always tests his friends—those who love God most. And it's true. You have to go through the fire so that you can be purified, so you can tolerate that closeness with God.

From time to time I yell at God. Then I brush myself off and go on. I find it so interesting when I tell people that I've been fighting with God and they look at me with such horror. But I believe that if you spend time with the Divine, there is a closeness. God is a friend, and it's okay to fight with God. And at the same time there is this awesomeness that makes you want to fall on the floor, face down, and say, "Yes, I know This-Is-The-Greatness-Of-All."

Prayer is going on all the time, every moment of my life, whether I am waking or sleeping. In my yogi period we were taught to call on the name of God at all times. We were given a mantra to repeat. Mine was one of the names of God. If music was on I said the name to the music. A time came when I couldn't find the name. It had disappeared from my consciousness. Then one day I began to do my healing work and it was there. I became conscious of the name in the middle of a syllable. I began to realize that my prayer was there all the time. There is a phrase in the Christian Bible where Paul says, "Pray without ceasing." My prayer hadn't disappeared; it had become me. In Sufism the key prayer is: "There is no God but God." This prayer is going on in me all the time, even if I don't think about it.

P R A Y E R S



May I follow a life of compassion in pity for the suffering of all living things. Teach me to live with reverence for life everywhere, to treat life as sacred and respect all that breathes. O Father, I grope amid the shadows of doubt and fear, but I long to advance toward the light. Help me to fling my life like a flaming firebrand into the gathering darkness of the world.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer, missionary doctor

Teach me, O God, not to torture myself,
not to make a martyr out of myself,
through stifling reflection,
but rather teach me to breathe deeply in faith.

Soren Kierkegaard, Danish theologian

I thank You, Lord, for knowing me better than I
know myself,
And for letting me know myself better than others
know me.

Make me, I pray to You, better than they suppose,
And forgive me for what they do not know.

Abu Bakr, the first Caliph of Islam

The prayers on this page are from Weave a Garment of Brightness: A Gathering of Prayers from Around the World, edited by Wayne Lee Jones and recently published by Berkley Books.

Deep peace
of the running wave to you,
Deep peace
of the quiet earth to you,
Deep peace
of the flowing air to you,
Deep peace
of the shining star to you.

Gaelic blessing

God,
Grant me the heart
to see holiness in every human being.
Grant me the power
to transform my anger into acts of grace.
Grant me the centeredness
to give and receive kindness
without being patronizing.
Despite discouragements,
may I continue to act
with love and understanding
both toward authorities who seem cruel,
and toward the victims of their cruelty.
May kindness be in my heart
and in my daily practice.
Amen.

Richard Boeke, Minister

Richard Boeke is minister of Sevenoaks Unitarian Church in England, which meets in Bessels Green Old Meeting House, built in 1716. He is also Secretary of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists. This prayer was written after a night train trip from Lahore, India to Islamabad, Pakistan.

THE SPIRITUAL QUEST



Carolyn Humphreys

In his book, *The World's Religions*, Huston Smith states that religion "confronts the individual with the most momentous option life can present. It calls the soul to the highest adventure it can undertake, a proposed journey across the jungles, peaks, and deserts of the human spirit. The call is to confront reality, to master the self. Those who dare to hear and follow that secret call soon learn the dangers and difficulties of its lonely journey."

I shall attempt to present a few reflections on the spiritual journey that are basic to the Christian life. Because I am a secular member of the Discalced Carmelite Order, some threads of Carmel's wisdom are woven through these pages.

The spirit and mystery of prayer is the very essence of the Carmelite ideal. The friars, nuns, and secular members of our order are as pilgrims of prayer ever moving on the slopes of Mount Carmel. Mount Carmel is a symbol for our spiritual journey. This adventure, for we never know where it will lead us, is marked by roots in the teachings of Jesus, growth in his love, and

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expression through the nitty gritty routines and service of our days. Indeed, our prayer bears fruit in the way we do our most mundane duties.

Teresa of Avila, foundress of the Carmelite reform, tells us that there are two requirements we must meet at the beginning of the spiritual journey. We must have a sound awareness of humility and self-knowledge. We cannot move ahead without them. To grow in humility and self-knowledge is to pass from focusing on our own power, control, and independence to humanity's unity, harmony, and interdependence in the light of gospel values.

Humility

Humility is the forerunner of all virtues and it gives us the desire to see ourselves in relation to God and others. When humility is located within us as a tranquil environment, we can remain calm and peaceful in our deepest center despite extreme difficulties or confusion in our home, or workplace, or personal circumstances. Humility teaches us that our spiritual life does not exist outside, above, or alongside the other areas or dimensions of our lives. As we grow in humility, we begin to delicately and unexpectedly touch the mysteries of God. Yes, we find God within us, as well as within the poorest of persons, no matter in what area his or her poverty expresses itself. Thomas Merton once wrote: "His one image is in us all and we discover him by discovering the likeness of his image in one another." The gentle power of humility puts our conversion choices into practice so that we can live them out among people in our everyday world.

Humility refreshes us as it increases our ability to transcend ourselves. We can gratefully accept who we are before God by reaching out in a positive way to all of life's circumstances and by finding the elements for our spiritual growth within them.

Self-knowledge

Self-knowledge is also needed for our beginning steps on the spiritual journey. Like humility, we must continue to grow in this knowledge as we move ahead on the spiritual road. In the early stages of the spiritual journey the layers of self are just beginning to be removed and this is usually a painful and frightening experience. As we ruminate upon the great mysteries of God, we discover our own lowliness and our continuous need for God's mercy. In our vulnerability we learn the importance of forgiveness from and reconciliation with God, others, and ourselves. Self-knowledge helps us to accept our limitations without self-pity, and to work with them and perhaps through them. By trying our best we learn that God can use anything to free us from the cages of our egos.

Listening

Our world is a complex web of finely balanced interconnections, and one's life is a thread of that web. We are related to the knowns and unknowns of all reality because everything we are in contact with connects us with the whole earth. The earth and all life are expressions of God's creative gifts. The decisions we make and the way in which we speak and conduct ourselves can support or harm, strengthen or unravel the threads of life that hold humanity together as well as connect us with God. When we grow in our oneness with God and the world, peace grows in our souls and extends to all humanity.

This is why listening is an important attribute on the spiritual journey. If we do not listen to others, how can we listen to God who often speaks in a whisper? If we serve those who are poor, chronically ill or living alone we may want to assist them with acquiring skills for a

*It takes
more
courage to
be in the
dark than
it does to
talk about
the light.*

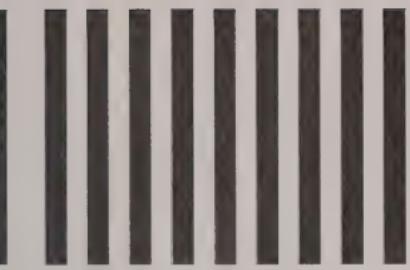
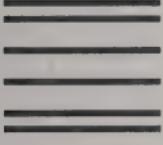
job, in easing their pain, or in referring them to social organizations. In the rush of intervention we make plans that will help 'fix' things and are stimulated to give verbal expression to our recommendations. Rather, we should do something else before we jump into action: extend a loving presence through listening. Listening is a sound prerequisite for action. If we immediately launch into an explanation of techniques, resources, or goals, it could distance or perhaps patronize the person we wish to help.

It takes more courage to be in the dark with someone who is in the dark than it does to stand outside and talk about the light. Just being with someone and sharing their pain by listening with the heart creates a caring and open climate. We need to be with the other before doing for the other because action may not be the most important priority. On the contrary, action may even shield us from the powerlessness we ourselves find in doing nothing. A quiet time to be present, with nothing more than a hand to hold, seems so simple yet may mean so much to the person in need. A healing presence may bring forth in the other his or her inner resources, evoking a will to live which looks beyond present limitations.

Realism

An authentic spiritual journey promotes a healthy sense of realism. We avoid being unrealistic about what we can accomplish and watch for the signs that show us we are over-extended, over-burdened, annoyed, or tired. We stop before being taxed beyond our breaking point and find satisfaction in what is basic in our lifestyles. We accept life as it comes and learn to take it easy. We do not cling to possessions, but treat them as gifts that we care for, or as items to be passed on if we do not need them. As we recognize the drawbacks of too much internal and external stuff, we also see the futility of endless debates, discussions, and speculations

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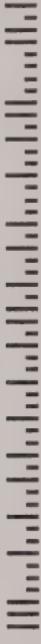
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In addition to sending in your own contribution and request to receive *Sacred Journey*, won't you become a "Spiritual Friend" to someone in need? You will earn their lasting gratitude—and ours.

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* * * * *

Please use this space to tell us your thoughts about this publication, *Sacred Journey*.

about problems in society. To learn how to control our tongues and minds, and channel our energies to activities that change things for the better, is an ongoing challenge. Indeed, it is everyday decisions and circumstances that deepen or diminish our relationship with God and foster or hinder our love for others. Our stronghold in life is our faith, grounded in Jesus, nourished by prayer, and challenged in the service of love.

The spiritual journey is not for the faint of heart. Faith is our ongoing strength as we move forward into the abyss of God's love. We know that moving ahead as pilgrims into a wild and unknown land takes valor. Teresa of Avila gives us support with her encouraging words, as we walk on in hope: "Let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you. For all things pass, save God who does not change. Be patient, and at the last you will find all fulfillment. Hold God, and nothing will fail you. For God alone is all."

A TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE

VISCERAL CLARITY

Tony Burkart

In Matthew's gospel Jesus is "led" into the wilderness. In Mark's gospel he is "driven" to a place of solitude, angst, and resolve. I was both gradually led and forcefully driven to my own Epiphany.

I was on retreat at the Benedictine monastery of which I am an Oblate. Life was cratering for me on a number of personal and professional fronts. It was a time for me to listen. Self-deception and hidden willfulness had become so dominant in my inner journey. Amidst the daily rhythms of the monastic routine, I prayed for the courage to glimpse into the darkness.

There is much personal history that led to my need and desire for this retreat. For fourteen years I had sensed a calling to be a Protestant minister. There were many precious moments, but through it all there remained a gut feeling of awkwardness. My professional life was like a record playing at the wrong speed.

Vietnam and a powerful experience in my college years had reawakened my yearning for God. Not hav-

Tony Burkart lives with his wife and son on a small farm on the coast of Maine. He is a Roman Catholic lay person, active in his local parish, and continues in full-time private practice in "Contemplative Psychotherapy."

ing grown up in any formal church or tradition, I was unsure of what to do with this wake-up call. The logical conclusion, or so I surmised, was to enter seminary and follow the path of ordained ministry. After several years of approach-avoidance—working as a therapist in the mental health field and for a year as a bush pilot—I decided to give seminary a whack. Through seminary, ordination, serving parishes, and operating a private counseling practice, something continued to feel off-balance. Perplexed and bewildered, I felt it was only a matter of trying harder and balance would come to my undertakings. But it never did, and in the early '90's my inner resources were rapidly dwindling. I was becoming cynical, if not a bit desperate.

So I chose to go to a place of solitude to wrestle with my sense of calling and my despair. At the monastery I remember sitting through the daily offices, vigilant, looking for something to happen. I hoped God would rush in and fill my aching void with a quick hit to the heart. I sincerely wanted God to enter into the void, but I also wanted control. What would happen if I really got what I asked for?

There came a moment late in the retreat when an unexpected, unengineered yielding, a letting go, seemed to grow in me. After some time this became a very clear beckoning to start walking. After Vespers, I walked out of the chapel and down the long, circuitous driveway that leads toward the Big Sur coast. I took in the exquisite sunset while trying to second-guess God's message for me. Walking back up the winding hill, I came to the end of my questions and an awful silence engulfed me as I settled in for the night in the guest house.

And so my stay ended. I said my goodbyes and, with the morning sun bouncing on my right shoulder, I headed off for the Monterey airport. What happened next is difficult to quantify or give form or shape. A gentle yet forceful, nearly visceral, clarity arose from within. All my experiences, all the circumstances, per-

ceptions, decisions, failures, and hungers that had led me into ordained ministry were held together by connective tissue. They all were an invitation to transformation. The instantaneous clarity had an integrity to it. Later, in discussions with my spiritual director, I realized that where I had been and where I had come to had an intuitive logic. The “call” I had experienced earlier in life was not to a particular role but to a radical change of heart.

In the months and years that followed there was not a dramatic change in location. My family remained with

me. I did not become a cloistered monk, and I still needed a shave in the morning. In fact, the changes in my life were marked by ever-so-slight inner shifts. Fears of the unknown, heightened anxiety levels, and a terror of being out of control sometimes overtook me. Yet a strange sense of detachment also allowed me to see in new ways without being consumed by these emotions.

Having my blinders torn off in this harshly gentle way produced a clarity which catapulted me into new spheres of self-understanding. I was truly led and then driven toward something life-giving.

For a number of years I had yearned to be closer to the celebration of the Sacraments. I found the Eucharist so life-giving and desired a deeper bond with the Contemplative tradition. The gift of this “visceral clarity” on the drive to Monterey was an inner permission and courage to walk one trembling step at a time on the path of change. This change in my life took specific form and structure. I left the ordained ministry, was confirmed in the Roman Catholic Church as a lay person, and embarked on a full-time counseling/spiritual direc-

The call I experienced was not to a particular roll, but to a radical change of heart.

tion practice. I am slowly letting go of the compulsion to engineer, bend, and distort my goals and life. Daily I surrender to allow my life to evolve as it will. I sense when to act and when to remain gathered with an acceptance of what comes. Perhaps the leading and the driven quality of my wilderness experience has brought a holy vulnerability to God's presence and activity in my life.

ILLUMINATIONS



Among the signs of success at the end is the turning to God at the beginning.

Ibn 'Ata'illah

13th Century Egyptian Sufi

A hint of eternity steals through my smallest daily activities and perceptions. I am not alone in my tiredness or sickness or fears, but at one with millions of others from many centuries and it is all part of life.

Etty Hillesum

Sometimes our light goes out, but is blown again into flame by an encounter with another human being. Each of us owes the deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this inner light.

Albert Schweitzer

The highest art is the art of living an ordinary life in an extraordinary manner.

Tibetan saying

God gave burdens, also shoulders.

Yiddish Proverb

O Mystery, you are life. I feel you all around. You are the fire in my heart, you are the holy sound. You are all of life. It is to you I sing.

Grant that I may feel you, always in every thing.

Paul Winter

From Missa Gaia



*Learn how to meditate on paper.
Drawing and writing are forms
of meditation.*

THOMAS MERTON

SPIRITUALITY & SERVICE



TO FIND LIFE

Barbara St. John



On a cold, early February afternoon I walked home from work on the narrow, sometimes cobblestone, streets of the Polish-American New York City enclave where I live. The day was particularly bitter, so I wore my "tundra" coat, designed for northern winters.

I usually make my half-mile trek home from my office on a side street, but on this day I chose to walk on the neighborhood's main avenue through the heart of town. The sun was shining brightly, and people bustled about.

As I neared my street, I saw and heard a commotion. School had let out and I could see that a gang of teens was in pursuit of someone. A Mexican boy was running wildly through the streets. A couple of the gang got right behind him and, as they neared the Polish deli where I stood, the boy tripped. He took a high-speed sprawl and landed right at my feet.

As he tried to get up, the other boys began cursing him and one, about sixteen years old, wasted no time in booting

Barbara St. John is a singer/songwriter and analyst who lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.

him in the head with his tan-colored construction boot. By now the rest of the gang had caught up.

I urged, "Boys, calm down. I don't want to see any violence." The young man at my feet tried to get up again. He was met by another blow to the head by a thick, waffle-soled boot.

"Stop that!" I cried. "Violence is never the way to resolve conflicts. I know that they're teaching you that in school." Inflamed with revenge, one of the youths retorted, "Yo! He hit my sister in school!" A few more flying boots sailed to his head. I looked down. I saw just a little blood. I was worried that if he took any more cranial assaults, they might put him in a coma, or even kill him.

"Look, I'm a woman and I hate any violence being done to girls. But doing the same thing to him is not right; it's not the answer. Can't you see you're hurting him?" I reasoned.

At these words, a surge of aggression seemed to collectively pass through them, and the young boy crawled behind me, sandwiching himself between the storefront wall and me. I could see now that he was bleeding from his hands and head, but this didn't stop the next wave of attempted kicks and punches.

Suddenly, I felt a force overcome me. It felt natural, it felt fierce, it felt motherly, it felt sisterly. I could feel myself swelling, ablaze with righteous anger. I knew that if they walloped him in the head one more time, they could kill him. I dropped my body on his, motionless now, covering him as best I could. "They would never boot a nice, middle-aged woman like me," I hoped.

I lay quietly over the young man for the next few moments. As people passed indifferently on the sidewalk, I thought to myself, "Is this boy not my brother? Over my dead body are they going to keep kicking his brains in, poor kid." I was so angry and disgusted at the pack display of urban youth violence that my only thought was to protect him from further, possibly seri-

ous injury.

The bank of eight or so fifteen-or-sixteen-year-old boys hesitated. One or two took a few last swipes with their winter boots but couldn't get at him now that I covered him. Somehow, by their poorly-aimed kicks, they missed me too, and their self-righteous cause was quickly loosing momentum. I looked up into their once-furious faces and could now see them peering down at me sheepishly, guiltily. Always optimistic about the innate goodness of young people, the thought returned, "They would never boot a nice woman like me." And they didn't.

They dispersed, yelling a few curses at the boy, and I, still angry, yelled after them, "Boys, go to your pediatricians and get some shots of progesterone or something!" I got up and turned to assist the boy. Miraculously, no blood was on my sea-green-colored coat. The boy stirred, seemingly stunned, but he quickly tried to cover his pain, fear, and tears, rising to his feet. I pulled a clean bandana from my coat pocket, an item I rarely carry, and began checking him.

*I
pondered
God's
protection, and
the capacity
for courage
the spirit
sends.*

"Thank you," was all he could say. "Are you all right?" I asked. I tried to mop his blood with my bandana. But with his orientation to time, place, and person, as well as his defenses, returning, I could see he just wanted to "take it like a man" and leave. He began to sprint away. I ran after him a few steps. "Here, at least take the bandana. You'll need it." He accepted it, and one last time, with a thick Mexican accent, said, "Thank you." "And see a doctor if you start feeling dizzy," I instructed. "You might have a concussion." Before I could ask him if he could see straight he was gone.

I looked around in front of the store where I stood. No

police, no one had stopped to help except another middle-aged woman who, at the tail end, asked if he was all right.

As I walked the rest of the way home, I felt incredibly alive, incredibly free, almost jubilant. "I feel like I just lived out my faith—*this was it*," I remember saying to myself. The experience was pregnant with meaning for me, and the truth was that a grace, or a force, came to assist me in helping the boy. I had absolutely no fear, an empowerment which I believe came from the spirit world. I had an intense conviction of what had to be done. I guess I was the primed, willing instrument that happened to be in the right place at the right time for service. But the rest of my simple walk home was an almost numinous experience for me as I pondered God's protection, the capacity for courage the spirit sends, and the outrageous joy and freedom that are gifts to the friends of God. Most importantly though, I came to discover anew the meaning of that mysterious paradox of the Christian faith, that in being willing to lose our life, we find it.

WAYS OF PRAYER



AND SERVICE IS OUR PRAYER

Linda Mack



In my church, The Unitarian Universalist Church of Fresno, we say, almost every Sunday as part of the liturgy, "Love is the doctrine of this church, the quest for truth its sacraments, and service is its prayer."

I joined this church as a young adult, having been brought up unchurched by parents who had "liberated" themselves from their own fundamentalist Christian upbringing. As a child I was not taught to pray. God was seldom mentioned, though I heard a lot about the teachings of Jesus. Service to the community we lived in was both preached at home and taught by example. The phrase "and service is its prayer" quite neatly disposed of the whole question of prayer for me for a number of years. No need to ask troubling questions about to whom or to what prayer was being directed. No answers were expected, no disappointments in store.

We moved to Palo Alto for a year while my husband was on sabbatical leave at Stanford University. Our three children were all in school for the whole day for

Linda Mack has been a homemaker, community organizer, paralegal, and a twice-elected member of the Fresno City Council. She serves on the steering committee of the local Lay Institute of Theology and enjoys spending time with her grandchildren.

the first time. So there I was with a whole year and lots of free time stretching out in front of me. It made me anxious, so when I was asked to be a volunteer teacher's aide at a school for multi-handicapped children, I signed up. I also agreed so readily since I had a friend whose baby had died and another whose child had a disabling illness. I knew the fortunate health and wholeness of my own children was nothing to be taken for granted. Service as prayer had taken on a meaning for me. Volunteering to work with other, less fortunate children was a sort of prayer, an incantation to assure that my own would stay well.

I was not qualified, in any professional sense, to work with emotionally disturbed children, but after an interview, the head of the school told me that she thought I was certainly strong enough to do so, and asked me to work in a class of autistic children. My job was just to be there, as an adult human being, talking to them, touching them, trying to get them to play with things, and helping to make them conscious of the world around them. Every confrontation with reality seemed to overwhelm them with terror and anger, and their retreats into their daydreams and hallucinations seemed nightmarish. Sometimes, for no apparent reason, they would begin to cry pitifully, cringe in terror, act out the wildest kind of fantasy, or fly into a violent rage. Matt, the nine-year-old I was most often assigned to, usually went through the whole gamut of emotions in any one morning. My joy really was to stay with him and to protect him and the others from his frequent and violent expressions of anger. He was exhausting to be around, and it didn't take long for me to understand why the teacher had been so glad when I showed up. Matt almost never spoke, and when he did it was to parrot some TV commercial. He rarely would play with anything except for the swings on the playground; he never played with another child, and he never laughed.



One day I was watching Matt and another boy out on the playground. They were both playing on the slide, apparently taking no notice of each other, as usual, when suddenly—I don't know just when or how it happened—they each became aware of the other. When one of them reached the bottom of the slide, he raced around to the ladder as fast as he could, trying to get to it and up to the top before the other kid slid all the way to the bottom. Soon, there they were, chasing each other around and up and down, shouting and, miracle of miracles, laughing. They were playing together!

Most mothers of preschoolers would find their actions completely unremarkable—but there they were, two nine-year-old boys playing together on a slide, and there I stood weeping for joy at the sight of it. Suddenly it was over. Another child came over to the ladder just as Matt was running toward it. He froze in his tracks. As a look of panic came over his face, I called out to him, "Matt. Wait. Wait just a little bit." He turned at the sound of my voice, came over to me, took my arms, and wrapped them around himself as I often did when it was necessary to restrain him, and said, in a quiet voice I had never heard him use, "Have to control myself."

As I held that boy and rocked him in my arms, I felt an embrace—as if both of us were being held and rocked in the presence of the most amazing grace. And then that moment passed also. Matt was once again back in his own private realm of terror as if all the love in the whole wide world was not yet enough to save him.

My family moved back to Fresno at the end of that year, and I have no way of knowing whether Matt

*Matt never
played with
another child,
and he never
laughed.*

eventually conquered his affliction. I've read that autistic children sometimes miraculously do so. He spoke another sentence to me during my time with him, so I've always held onto hope that he did.

My own children are grown with children of their own now, and my life has been graced with other fleeting moments when I felt especially connected with, or in the presence of, what I choose to call the "spirit of life." Times of extreme joy or sorrow, frenetic activity or calm, all have carried with them the possibility of standing in its presence. I continue to do community service, not as incantation, but for the same reason I meditate daily: to lose myself, thus opening the way to that possibility.



Winter Hope

Jody Adams

Own to your heart life's barren scenes
As winter keens...
Black sky massing
Cloud of wet fall blanket down...
Muted sound...
Rigid cold.
Burrow now, traveler, young and old,
Find repose.
Come now the February snows
That slow the mind
And inward turn the soul.

Candle reaching in the night
Pierce the universe with light...
Shadow wide...
Shadow high...
Flicker, flicker now your spark.
None value light who know not dark.
None know belief who dread not doubt.
None breathe with life who sense not death.
None contemplate except of Earth
The long eternal coming forth.

There the light
Always ahead,

Jody Adams is a social worker and counselor from New Mexico. She recently told us that she has every copy of our journal since she became a reader ten years ago.



The doorway from the place of dead,
For one into the other moves
And ever ever turns the wheel
That clears the trace
And sets the course
To place of green...
Alive, serene...
Born of motion, fired by grace...
Growing, love bestowing,
Yet untrod
New path
of God.

Re-incarnation

Mary Krane Derr

Prayer fingers
clustered and splayed
out, in, like the Pleiades
enfleshed. Again. Expanding.
Holding fast.
Collapsing into the empty between
contracting hard
to ease out
the spiraling and spiraling fullness of God.

Mary Krane Derr is a Roman Catholic and Buddhist practitioner. A poet and nonfiction writer, she resides in Chicago with her husband and daughter.

BOOKS WE'VE ENJOYED



Instructions to the Cook: A Zen Master's Lessons in Living a Life that Matters, by Bernard Glassman and Rick Fields, Bell Tower/Crown: New York, 1996, 180 pages, paperback, \$12.00.

Cooking, like living, can be either a tedious daily chore or a sustaining act of faith. This book offers sage advice and masterful examples of how to nourish the soul.

When we live fully, Bernard Glassman, abbot of the Zen Community of New York, says life becomes "the supreme meal." We don't have to just scrape by; we must take the ingredients we have on hand to make the best meal that we can. After all, if we look closely at our lives, we will discover that, moment by moment, we already have all that we really need.

The supreme meal is no meager, quick fill-me-up. It is a five-course feast: spirituality, study and learning, right livelihood, social action, and relationship and community, are to be lovingly prepared and served up in well-balanced portions. While this may sound like a tall order, Glassman offers the example of his own life. Once a California-based aerospace engineer, he founded the Graystone Mandala, a network of businesses and not-for-profit community development organizations in Yonkers, New York. First came the bakery which successfully supplies local cafes, Manhattan gourmet shops, and Ben and Jerry's ice cream company with wholesome breads and artful pastries. Beyond bread, the group renovates apartment buildings where formerly homeless families reside, receive job and educational train-

ing, and, in time, can become permanent homeowners.

This book, written in an easy-to-read style, brings the quest for enlightenment to the level where we all eat, breathe, and yearn to care for one another.

Soul Food: Stories to Nourish the Spirit and Heart, by Jack Kornfield and Christina Feldman, HarperCollins: San Francisco, 1996, 240 pages, trade paperback, \$14.00.

This book is akin to a delicacy cookbook chock-full of tempting treats to nibble and savor. Stories and parables—some offered as “virtual snapshots” and others as longer, time-tested morality tales—are collected from Christian, Buddhist, Sufi, Chassid, Hindu, Zen, Native American, and African sources and sorted in thematic chapters rather than by religious tradition. For instance, an ancient Zen koan is followed by the story of a Boston cabbie who serenely embraces his life even in bumper-to-bumper traffic.

My favorite story, not surprisingly, takes place around a table. A young girl orders what she wants in a restaurant only to have her grandmother and father object and order something more healthy. The waiter listens, then clarifies the little girl’s order directly with her. She exclaims to her surprised family, “You know what? He thinks I’m real!” He sees, hears, and heeds her wishes, and that makes all the difference.

Teachers, writers, ministers, and lovers of wisdom will find much to chew upon in this book. When you need a wise story to tell, this volume offers a wonderful selection that may soon roll right off the tip of your tongue.

P R A Y E R R E Q U E S T S



Our staff prays for all the requests we receive. We can print here only those requests we receive before we have to send the list to the printers.

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Bob	Mary Jane	Patricia	Megan
Deloris	Theresa	Prakash	Ken

Suffering from chronic and/or serious illness, and/or the aftermath of surgery:

Eve	Helen	Corrine
Shirley	Linda	Bernie

Suffering from addictions:

Bill	David	Joyce	Linda
Cecil	Edwin	S.Quinn	

Suffering from anxiety, fears, loss, and depression:

Evelyn	Mrs. Howell	John
Eric	Margaret	Bruce

Seeking peace, maturity, wisdom, mercy, and guidance:

Marie	Roberta	Jorge	Barbara
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Carol	Caroline	Eleanor	

Please pray for all the men, women, and children listed above, and for all beings everywhere who are in need of healing.

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